

Joan Hannon (by Martha Olney¹) August 2020

Joan Underhill Hannon joined the Berkeley Economics department in 1977, upon completion of her Ph.D. at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Raised in Long Beach, CA and a graduate of UC Santa Cruz, Hannon is an economic historian whose research focuses on 19th century U.S. immigration and poverty. At Berkeley, Hannon taught graduate and undergraduate courses in economic history. Hannon was denied tenure in 1985. She subsequently moved to and was tenured at St. Mary's College of California in nearby Moraga, from where she retired in the 2010s. Hannon's experience and ultimate departure from Berkeley is an important part of the fabric of women faculty's experience.

Hannon's politics and intellectual lens always put her more in what is now termed the "heterodox" camp of economics, and what was in the 1970s and 1980s termed the "Marxist" or "leftist" camp. At a time when mathematical modeling was the dominant paradigm in economics, when the school of rational expectations was on the rise, when "homo economicus" and the "representative agent" were rarely-questioned approaches, Hannon brought a world view and research agenda decidedly at odds with the accepted mainstream of economics.

Her intellectual journey started at childhood.

I grew up in a middle class lily-white suburb, went to lily-white suburban schools. But I always had this kind of interest in and sympathy with the poor. . . . When I was 12 years old in 1962, my family took a trip around the country in our Chevy station wagon. It was a three-month trip . . . and included a lot of time in the South where I saw extreme poverty and racism and institutional discrimination like I had never seen or imagined. My eyes were just popping out. . . . And then when I was in college, I got interested in leftist politics. At Santa Cruz . . . you had to take, in your freshman year, a core course. My core course was something like 'Comparing Revolutionary and Evolutionary Social Change.' In the context of the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights Movement . . . [and] the Black Power movement, that course really politicized me. (Hannon, interview with the author, pp. 2 and 4.)

At Santa Cruz, the Economics Department had no women faculty. Hannon was the only female student in the economics major.

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I was the only woman and they all sort of laughed at me and made me feel like a complete outcast. . . . But I did have supporters. There was the person we took Econ 1 from and there were two other leftist professors. (Hannon, interview with the author, p. 3.)

University of Wisconsin was little different.

At Wisconsin there were no women in the department. We had one [woman faculty] visitor and that was it. (Hannon, interview with the author, p. 6.)

Hannon found her way to economic history, where she worked with her advisor Jeffrey Williamson and his colleague and co-author Peter Lindert.

Jeff and Peter were just fantastic mentors in so many different ways that it would take me hours to talk about them all. . . . First of all, let me say that they never shared my view of history, or my politics. But they respected my right to have that view and they left me alone in that and they never tried to talk me out of it or anything like that. They supported and guided me as a student and throughout my career. (Hannon, interview with the author, p. 4.)

Assigned to teach a required graduate course in economic history at Berkeley – a requirement that many students resented – Hannon challenged students to view our capitalist economic system through an historian’s eyes. Being expected to learn and critique feudalism made some students angry. Not content to suffer in silence, they made her teaching life miserable.

I was young, I was female, and I was teaching a course they really didn’t want to take and they just unloaded. Because I was young and female, they felt that they could unload all of their anger about the course on me. . . . I don’t think they would have done that to a male faculty member. . . . It was pretty awful. It was the women graduate students who explained that to me. “You know, here’s what’s going on. Here’s why the male graduate students are being so antagonistic towards you: It’s because they’re so angry about taking this course.” (Brown and Hannon, interview with the author, p. 5.)

The culture of the department also did not create a welcoming or encouraging atmosphere. Barrows Hall, where the Economics Department was housed, is an eight-story rectangular building easily five times as long as it is wide. Women were offered a daily reminder that Barrows was not designed for them: only the teaching floors had been constructed with both male and female bathrooms. Floors 2 through 7 had initially housed only men’s bathrooms. By the mid-1970s, the bathrooms on odd-numbered floors had been converted to women’s rooms, but the urinals remained as an ever-present reminder of women’s status in the academic hierarchy.

Faculty in economics, to the extent they worked in Barrows, kept their doors closed. This was not wholly unreasonable as the noise travelled unimpeded from one end of the hallway to the other, from the click-click of someone’s heels to office hour conversations.

Barrows was just so cold. . . I even had a friend who visited me from Wisconsin and she walked into the fifth floor of Barrows and just said "Oh my god! Is this a prison?" . . . You know there was nobody in the hall, all the doors were closed. It just vibrated cold. (Brown and Hannon, interview with the author, p. 8.)

The impact of the closed door policy was to eliminate easy conversations among colleagues. Knocking on doors was almost a violation of some unspoken rule, unless it was office hours. The easy conversations Hannon had been accustomed to at University of Wisconsin were entirely absent in Barrows.

The whole thing was awkward. I came from Santa Cruz where the whole faculty was so available to students. And then Madison, where everybody kept their doors open. . . If you ran into any kind of a problem or glitch, or had an interesting result, you could go down the hall and talk to somebody. People were always running up and down the halls talking to each other. And then I come to Barrows with these long halls and all the doors are shut and nobody ever knocks on them. . . . I mentioned this once to a [departmental] colleague, and how different it was from Madison where you can go talk to somebody any time you ran into a problem with your research. And he said to me, "Well, you know, if you need help with your research, maybe you don't belong at Berkeley." (Hannon, interview with the author, p. 7.)

Moreover, about one-third of the department – the faculty more oriented toward mathematics and statistics – had decamped to Evans Hall in the years before Hannon's arrival. There was a parallel department infrastructure in Evans making travel to Barrows unnecessary except for the occasional department faculty meeting. The upshot: one-third of the faculty had little way of knowing the other two-thirds.

Regular department meetings could address the geographic divide. However, for women faculty, the department meetings were hardly safe spaces, rife as they were with sexist "jokes" and comments. For Hannon, the easier solution was to simply avoid the meetings.

I think I've forgotten a lot of those memories. But I do, now that you mention it, I do remember that there were explicitly sexist jokes that would be told. But there again, you know, I went to faculty meetings my first year. I couldn't stand them and I stopped going. . . . It was too much old boy stuff that I just couldn't handle. . . . I didn't expose myself to that stuff very much. I stayed in my own little lonely corner. (Hannon, interview with the author, p. 9.)

While doing so may have been a helpful short-run strategy, it was a long-run strategy that further harmed her chances at tenure. Upon reflection thirty-plus years later, Hannon included attending faculty meetings as something she would do differently. More so, she would be much more deliberate at creating networks of support through getting to know senior faculty.

The male junior faculty had much easier access, informal access, to the senior faculty than the women, than I did anyway. . . . I was young and I was shy. And I just gave up. If I had it to do over again with the knowledge and stuff that I have now, I would do it very differently. . . . I would just push myself on people. I would knock on doors. I would pick some people that I was interested in what they were writing and I would start reading what they were writing and sending them comments. . . . I would try to make myself valuable to them. . . . I would start taking the initiative. (Hannon, interview with the author, p. 8.)

Was gender at the heart of her tenure decision? The question is nearly impossible to answer. Gender runs as a thread through everything.

Gender influenced everything that happened to me the whole time I was going through Berkeley. So in that sense, it affected my tenure review because it affected everything I brought to the tenure review. . . . Your teaching evaluations are affected by gender. . . . If you took maternity leave (without pay, as I remember), it was supposed to be “time off the clock.” . . . But in my tenure review, . . . they were treating it as time on the clock. . . . I bore the overwhelming majority of the day-to-day childcare responsibilities, whereas most of the men in the department had a child care provider. (Hannon, interview with the author, pp. 9, 12, 13.)

How has the profession changed over the last four or more decades?

I do think things are different – better – now. Look at the Economic History Association. There used to be three of us women, and we used to meet as the women’s lunch at one table. We didn’t even need one table; there were just the three of us. . . . Now sometimes there are 40 women at those lunches. . . . That’s really changed. And the same with the AEA. There’s definitely changes. It’s definitely getting better. More women are coming into the field. Whether it’s getting easier for them, I don’t know, but more women are coming in. It’s still the minority, no question, but more women are coming in. (Hannon, interview with the author, p. 12.)

Works Cited

Hannon, Joan U. Interview with author. Albany, CA. 15 April 2020. Transcript archived at <URL>.

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